United Nations S/PV.5102

Security Council

Fifty-ninth year

Provisional

5102nd meeting

Thursday, 16 December 2004, 10 a.m.

New York

President:	Mr. Baali	(Algeria)
Members:	Angola	Mr. Lucas
	Benin	Mr. Zinsou
	Brazil	Mr. Valle
	Chile	Mr. Andereya
	China	Mr. Zhang Yishan
	France	Mr. De La Sablière
	Germany	Mr. Pleuger
	Pakistan	Mr. Akram
	Philippines	Mr. Baja
	Romania	Mr. Motoc
	Russian Federation	Mr. Denisov
	Spain	Mr. Yáñez-Barnuevo
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Ms. Davis
	United States of America	Mr. Leahy

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

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04-64852 (E)

The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

The President (*spoke in Arabic*): In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, I shall take it that the Security Council agrees to extend an invitation under rule 39 of its provisional rules of procedure to Mr. Kieran Prendergast, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs.

It is so decided.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda.

The Security Council is meeting in accordance with the understanding reached in its prior consultations.

At this meeting, the Security Council will hear a briefing by Mr. Kieran Prendergast, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs.

I now give him the floor.

Mr. Prendergast: Four weeks ago, in his final briefing to the Security Council on this subject, the Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General to the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Palestinian Authority spoke about the critical juncture the Middle East had reached and outlined the elements that have turned the present period into such momentous days in the region. This month, I am glad to be able to confirm that there exists, once again, a window of opportunity to revitalize the Middle East peace process.

There have been a marked number of positive developments.

The Palestinian leadership has continued to oversee the transitional period in a highly commendable manner, with no significant internal unrest.

Significant strides have been made towards ensuring that the presidential elections scheduled for 9 January 2005 will be conducted in a free and fair manner, in accordance with international standards.

Elections will be monitored by more than 400 international electoral observers. The United Nations has provided technical assistance to the Central Elections Commission. We will also establish a Liaison and Support Unit, generously made possible by the Government of Japan, to support and facilitate the work of the incoming international observer delegations and to assist in their liaison with the electoral commission and Israeli authorities.

Registration for Palestinian voters reopened on 24 November and continued until 1 December. Almost 80 per cent of adults have registered. Israel did not lift the ban imposed in September against voter registration in East Jerusalem, but it has reassured us that residents of East Jerusalem will be able to vote in accordance with the modalities of the 1996 presidential elections, as set out in the Oslo Accords. We have also taken positive note of the Government of Israel's announced intention to lift movement restrictions and withdraw from Palestinian villages and cities for the election.

Campaigning will officially begin on 26 December and last through 7 January. Some changes were recently introduced to the electoral law, most of which concern legislative elections, scheduled for later in 2005. All these developments lead us to expect a free, fair and democratic electoral process.

The Palestinian leadership has made great strides in moving forward in areas far beyond the electoral process. Earlier this month, Palestine Liberation Organization Chairman Mahmoud Abbas — Abu Mazen — and Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei — Abu Ala — held talks with Syrian and Lebanese leaders in a historic visit to both countries, after an important visit to Egypt. We took particular note of the Palestine Liberation Organization Chairman's pledge to end the "armed struggle" and henceforth pursue the "democratic route to liberation", to quote him twice.

While significant steps towards reform have been taken, security reform and the establishment of full control by the Authority over the Palestinian areas continue to be among the primary challenges facing the Palestinian leadership. Priority should be given to establishing a society based on the rule of law. In this context, we have also noted positively the Palestine

Liberation Organization Chairman's frank assertion that

> "The Palestinian [security] apparatus needs discipline. There is security chaos; that is why we ... are seeking to unify the security apparatus."

With the emergence of a more positive atmosphere, support among the Palestinian public for violent acts and terror directed against Israelis has declined dramatically. That is a critically important development. A poll conducted by the Jerusalem Media and Communications Centre found that, for the first time since September 2000, a majority of Palestinians oppose all acts of violence against Israel. In contrast to many previous polls in recent years and months, the survey also found that Palestinians once again look to the future with hope.

All Palestinian factions appear to have taken note of the shift in public opinion. Recently, senior Hamas leaders have spoken about the possibility of a long-term ceasefire with Israel and of accepting the establishment of a Palestinian State alongside Israel, within the 1967 borders and with Jerusalem as its capital. Such a ceasefire would greatly facilitate the ability of both parties to build on the potential opportunities of the present moment.

The optimism and hope that prevails among Palestinians is mirrored on the Israeli side. According to the latest Peace Index, 70 per cent of the Jewish Israeli public are now more optimistic about the chances of peace with the Palestinians. A clear majority of 75 per cent favour the resumption of negotiations. Many Israelis believe that the current Palestinian leadership has been handling the affairs of the Palestinian Authority in a positive way. A majority think that the Government of Israel should facilitate living conditions of the Palestinian population in the occupied territory by ending closures and removing checkpoints — a belief which we wholeheartedly share.

The Government of Israel has contributed meaningfully to enabling a positive transition period. Security cooperation between the parties has resumed. Prime Minister Sharon has spoken of contact between the parties that is "nearly daily, mainly to do with coordinating various things". Israel has scaled back military activity in areas under the control of the Palestinian Authority, and the Prime Minister, Mr. Sharon, has announced his willingness to cease all military incursions into Palestinian areas if calm prevails. The PLO Chairman and the Israeli Prime Minister have declared themselves willing to meet each other. In recognition of a long-standing Quartet condition, the Israeli Prime Minister has said that Israel would want to coordinate security arrangements with the Palestinian Authority for the planned implementation of his initiative to withdraw Israeli troops and settlers from the Gaza Strip and parts of the northern West Bank and for the transfer of the evacuated areas to the Palestinians.

In addition, Prime Minister Sharon has publicly acknowledged that incitement in the Palestinian media has dropped noticeably, in accordance with Palestinian obligations under the road map. Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz has overseen the issuing of increased numbers of entrance permits to workers from the West Bank. And on 12 December, the Israeli Cabinet approved a prisoner release, the details of which are yet to be determined.

We note with satisfaction and hope for the future that the overall level of violence has dropped in the past month. In that context, the United Nations has decided to reduce the current security rating for the Gaza Strip back to phase 3, after it had been raised to phase 4 earlier in the year. Nevertheless, casualty figures are still too high. Since our last briefing to the Council, 52 Palestinians and 7 Israelis have been killed, and 172 Palestinians and 29 Israelis have been injured.

While there has been a reduction in the number of incidents, a disturbing level of violence continues. Palestinian militants continue to fire mortar shells and Qassam rockets against Israeli settlements and targets inside Israel, albeit in reduced numbers. We hope that, in the coming weeks and months, a democratically empowered and strengthened Palestinian Authority will be able to meet fully its obligation under international law and under the road map to do its utmost to prevent such attacks.

In the Gaza Strip, in particular, the situation has remained unstable. On 7 December, an Israeli soldier was killed and four others were wounded when Hamas militants set off a bomb near the Karni crossing in central Gaza. A prolonged gun-battle ensued, in which four Palestinians died, among them a 14-year-old bystander. Hours later, an Israeli helicopter fired a missile at suspected Palestinian militants in the area,

killing one. On 10 December, four Israelis were injured in a mortar attack on the settlement of Neve Dekalim. Five Israeli soldiers were killed and six were wounded on 12 December in an explosion beneath an Israeli military outpost close to the Rafah checkpoint on the Gaza-Egypt border. In the ensuing gun-battle, at least one Palestinian was killed. The Israeli air force also fired six missiles at targets in Gaza City, though, fortunately, no casualties were reported. Over the past two days, four Palestinians were killed in various incidents in the Gaza Strip, among them a taxi driver who was hit by Israeli gunfire near a checkpoint. Five Israelis were wounded in those incidents.

During the reporting period, Israel has also continued to carry out illegal extrajudicial killings. Four Palestinians were wounded on 9 December, when an Israeli aircraft fired a missile at a car in the Gaza Strip in an attempt on the life of the leader of the Popular Resistance Committees, a militant faction based in Gaza. There have been reports that a wanted Islamic Jihad militant was killed by Israeli troops while he was lying on the ground, wounded and unarmed, during an arrest raid near Jenin in the West Bank on 3 December. We welcome the Israeli Defense Force's (IDF) announcement of an investigation of this incident.

As we have said repeatedly, the Government of Israel must respect its legal obligations to ensure the safety of Palestinian civilians and to refrain from the disproportionate use of force. On 20 November, two 15-year-old Palestinian stone-throwers were shot dead in Nablus. On 29 November, a 38-year-old Palestinian physician was killed when Israeli forces fired tank shells and automatic gunfire towards the Rafah refugee camp. Five Palestinians were shot dead on 9 December along the Egyptian border in the Gaza Strip, though it remains unclear whether they were militants, smugglers or civilians. On 10 December, a 7-year-old girl was killed by Israeli forces in Khan Younis. Five Palestinian schoolchildren were wounded on 12 December, as an IDF tank fired three shells in the Khan Younis refugee camp, one of which exploded in a yard behind a school.

Israel has continued to demolish houses and has maintained movement restrictions for the Palestinian population, although in an eased form. Israel's construction of the barrier in the West Bank also continues, with worrisome consequences for the Palestinian population, despite the Government of Israel's ongoing revision of the barrier's route, which is moving closer to the Green Line.

Barrier construction and movement restrictions are the chief reasons for the continuing economic crisis in the Palestinian areas. They reduce employment and they limit Palestinian access to basic services. The adjusted unemployment rate continues to stand at 32.6 per cent. Just over 40 per cent of Palestinians between the ages of 15 and 24 are unemployed. Approximately half the Palestinian population are living below the official poverty line of $2.10 per day; 16 per cent live in extreme poverty. Poverty breeds despair and extremism.

To address the economic crisis, the main donor coordination body, the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee, met last week in Oslo. The donors will continue to coordinate their efforts. They look forward to an improvement of conditions on the ground, which will enable them to maintain and increase their commitment. The new spirit of cooperation was underscored by the fact that, at the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee, Palestinians, Israelis, and key representatives of the international community met for the first time in a year, in a meeting that was characterized as harmonious, constructive and creative.

Israel's economy has not been exempt either from the consequences of conflict. I would like to reiterate our firm belief that for the peoples on both sides, only a peace process and a full and final settlement of the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians will enable a move from crisis management and recovery to sustained and sustainable development and prosperity.

Meanwhile, the Quartet principals met on 23 November in Sharm el-Sheikh in the margins of the Iraq conference. They discussed the current transition in the Palestinian Authority and agreed that the immediate priorities were to provide technical support for the presidential elections and to help ensure the fiscal stability of the Palestinian governing body.

I think it would be right to say that all members of the Quartet are united in their view that the situation at present is conducive to change: long overdue change; change for the better. The Quartet envoys remain in close contact with one another, with a view to coordinating and planning ahead beyond the crucial first step of the Palestinian elections.

Both parties seem to have realized the potential for change that is inherent in the present situation. There exists at present a real opportunity to implement the road map's provisions and to make a huge leap towards a settlement of the conflict.

There are two catalysts for this. One is the transitional process in the Palestinian Authority, which I have outlined above and where we have already seen significant movement towards the fulfilment of important Palestinian obligations under the road map. The second is the Israeli initiative to withdraw from the Gaza Strip and parts of the northern West Bank. When the Israeli disengagement plan was presented as a unilateral initiative, the Quartet specified that if the Israeli withdrawal initiative was implemented in full coordination with the Palestinians and with the Quartet, then it could prove to be a key contribution towards a genuine revival of the peace process. The withdrawal should also lead to the end of the occupation of the Gaza Strip and should be accompanied by similar steps in the West Bank, and thus be fully consistent with the road map.

The redeployment of Israeli troops, military installations and settlements, including settlers, can represent a step forward — with highly symbolic, precedent-setting significance — on the road towards ending the occupation that began in 1967 and towards achieving a lasting peace in the Middle East. In that sense, Prime Minister Sharon is indeed planning to go further than any other Israeli prime minister before him, evacuating Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory for the first time since 1967.

That, and the statements by both parties that they are determined to seize the present opportunity, bring hope. The United Nations, together with its partners in the Quartet, stands ready to assist the parties to maintain momentum. We believe that now is the time to engage actively, to help the process along and to determine how best the international community can contribute to a revival of a sustainable peace process between Israelis and Palestinians. The end goal remains unchanged: the end of the occupation that began in 1967 and the establishment of an independent, sovereign, viable, democratic and contiguous Palestinian State living alongside Israel in peace and security.

Both parties still have important steps to take. Israeli settlement activity, including the natural growth of settlements, has not been frozen, as Israel is obliged to do under the road map. The Palestinian Authority must take further steps to bring to a complete halt the violence and terror and to institute full reform of the security services, as it is required to do under the road map.

Potential opportunities have also emerged more clearly on the wider regional track. When Terje Roed-Larsen visited Damascus in late November, Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad reiterated his unequivocal willingness to resume negotiations with Israel without any conditions, within the framework of the relevant Security Council resolutions and the fundamental principle of land for peace. Both President Mubarak and King Abdullah have offered to mediate between Syria and Israel. We believe that the outstretched Syrian hand should be grasped.

In that regard, we welcome Israeli Foreign Minister Shalom's statement at the Herzliya conference yesterday that Israel "should not deny a hand reaching out for peace" and should instead "examine it very carefully". Minister Shalom added that "these voices should not be ignored" and that "any declaration on wanting peace from an Arab leader is a positive declaration". Such statements by the two sides are particularly welcome because movement on the regional track would help to reinforce the momentum that is being created for progress with the peace process. The end goal is and must remain a just, lasting and comprehensive peace in the Middle East.

Unfortunately, tension has recently increased somewhat along the Blue Line. A hitherto unknown group claimed responsibility for the Katyusha attack against Israel of 15 November. In the aftermath of that attack, the United Nations called on Lebanon "to double its efforts in order to ensure an immediate halt to serious violations" of the Blue Line. We were pleased to note that the Lebanese authorities spoke out against the incident and launched an investigation, but we reiterate our call on the Government of Lebanon to extend its authority over all its territory, as demanded in the relevant Security Council resolutions.

Israel has meanwhile continued its intermittent air violations of the Blue Line. On 5 December, for example, 14 air violations were recorded. The United Nations has continued to call on Israel to cease the over-flights violating the Blue Line, while emphasizing to all parties that one violation does not justify another.

Let us hope — more than that, let us do our best to ensure — that the parties realize the potential of the moment and continue to build on it. Some momentum has already been created, but much work remains to be done if potential is to become achievement. We should make clear that we expect both Israel and the Palestinians to seize the moment to act constructively and to work within the framework of the road map. And each of us should do everything within our power to encourage and help the parties to persevere as they move along the narrow and difficult road that leads to a just, lasting and comprehensive peace in the Middle East. For they will undoubtedly need our encouragement and our support.

The meeting rose at 10.35 a.m.